

# Hardcore Gamers and Casual Gamers Playing Online Together

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we discuss why Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) need to attract both *hardcore* and *casual* players and study the evolution of MMOG features for this purpose.

## 1 Hardcore Gamers and Casual Gamers Must Play Together

As opposed to the *casual gamer*, a *hardcore gamer* dedicates most of his leisure time and sometimes even more to his favorite virtual world. Indeed, the average duration of a normal game session can be huge in traditional MMOG like Everquest [4] or Anarchy Online [1]. These games are designed to reward the time devoted to it. Gathering a team of complementary players, traveling through the virtual world to get to the desired location, finding rare items, fighting very powerful Non Player Characters (NPC) are tasks which take time and dedication to complete, but give the final gratification its meaning.

**Why MMOG need to adapt to the casual gamer market:** Economically speaking, the costs currently involved to develop, deploy and maintain such games imply a high number of monthly subscribers for a game to be profitable. To enable the development of more and different MMOG, it seems then necessary to extend their audience. The more obvious way is to reach the *casual gamer* market.

Moreover, MMOG suffer from a bad reputation, often described as addictive desocializing games, equivalent to a drug (*Evercrack* is the nickname of Everquest). Whereas research in this area does not yet explain if MMOG themselves create addiction or attract an audience predisposed to addiction, legislations are discussed all around the world to try and control this issue. This image could be corrected by the design of game-plays more suitable to short playing-sessions.

**Why MMOG need to keep the hardcore gamer market:** the success of such a game is highly dependent on the construction of a community. The main feature of a MMOG is to involve each player in a parallel society where they can pursue a second social life. Virtual societies are organized in a number of hierarchic players regroupments. The existence of such organizations is one of the basic features of a MMOG, the very purpose of these games being to interact with other players. These regroupments can sometimes count a very important number of players. Planning a play session for such an organization, managing

common resources, distributing responsibilities, defining and enforcing the common life rules inside the sub-community, and moderating personal conflicts are essential tasks for everyone playing experience. These responsibilities are very time consuming and ask for a strong dedication and good knowledge of the game. *Hardcore gamers* are the people who build the virtual society without which any MMOG would be pointless.

## 2 MMOG Game-Play Features Review

### 2.1 Growing by Interacting with the Virtual World

We will here describe the features involved in the growth of a powerful avatar.

**Competition with the Environment:** by achieving specific tasks, the player can accumulate *experience points* which will be transformed into enhancements of the avatar abilities. This mechanism is commonly called *Player versus Environment* (PvE) and most often consists in killing hostile Non Player Character (NPC). Experience points can sometimes also be obtained through the achievement of *quests* or *missions* assigned by the game.

In a typical MMOG like Everquest, this mechanism is the main feature of the game-design and to ensure the longevity of the game, gaining experience is a slow and sometimes tricky process. If the player actions result in the death of its avatar in the game world, penalties are applied. The avatar can lose experience levels, and has to retrieve its equipment at the location of the unfortunate event. Mistakes thus have very time consuming consequences on the growth of an avatar. Also designed and launched at the beginning of the popularization of the MMOG genre, Anarchy Online provided less frustrating features for the *casual gamer*: the experience loss was limited to the former experience level, and it was possible to retrieve all the equipment of the avatar easily. Still, getting experience was a long process and game-designers have been trying to find alternatives to retain *casual gamers*. In Eve Online [3], avatar learning, once triggered, grows according to time and not to player actions. In World of Warcraft [7], the player gets an experience bonus for being out of the game under some specific but easy to match conditions. These alternatives are risky to deploy: while they allow *casual gamers* to keep the pace with *hardcore gamers* to a certain extent, it is necessary to ensure that the growth of the avatar is not the only reward provided by the game-play (for instance, by making quests entertaining by themselves). Otherwise, it may be perceived as a very unfair mechanism for *hardcore gamers*.

**Items:** avatar abilities can also be enhanced through the possession of specific objects of the virtual world. As these items are only powerful in comparison with other items in the world, they have to be rare and difficult to acquire. In most of the MMOG, including recent ones, finding these objects requires the gathering of a high number of very skilled players with complementary avatars, and a very long and difficult fight against one or several NPC. The expression *camping* thus describes the activity of waiting the spawn of a specific NPC in order to kill it in loop until the drop of a highly desired treasure. In Anarchy Online like in

other MMOG, turns between player guilds had to be arranged outside of the game by the guild leaders in order to avoid conflicts for fighting a specific NPC potentially possessing such an item. And usually, the possession of the treasure so much people fought for naturally goes to the most meriting player, that is, to the avatar in need of the object whose player is very involved in the virtual world, that is, to a *hardcore gamer*... This kind of scheme can be retrieved in even the most recent games, like World of Warcraft. However, a game like City of Heroes [2] got completely rid of this feature, the most evident source of conflict between *hardcore* and *casual gamers*. In this game, there is no rare item. The lack of this feature can however be a very bad choice, depriving *hardcore gamers* from in-game recognition of their strong involvement.

## 2.2 Virtual Society

We will here review the features helping to create an in-game virtual society.

**Cooperation between players:** the current main feature implementing player cooperation is the design of complementary classes of avatars. Each class defines strengths and weaknesses, and players thus gain an advantage in collaborating with each other. When Everquest was first released, it was quite difficult to progress in the game alone. This feature forced each player to socialize with other participants very early in the game. However, finding complementary teammates takes time, sometimes more than the team will actually be playing as a whole. Quickly, new regions of the virtual world have been introduced to provide a safe sandbox in which low-level avatars could progress alone. While the progression of an avatar is usually facilitated in a team, current game designs always make possible the progression of an avatar on its own, at least at the beginning. It is however obvious that the less the feature is enforced, the less the creation of each player in-game relationship network will be stimulated and there is a great risk that the MMOG becomes a subscription based solo adventure game.

Player organizations are an essential part of the creation of the virtual society. *Casual gamers* can of course be involved in such organizations, but it is more difficult for them to share resources, especially with other *casual gamers* since they would probably miss each others playing time frame. In Neocron [5], an apartment was available for each player organization, which could be used to store game items in order to facilitate exchanges and collaboration between members. The virtual economy also has a lot of importance in MMOG. In order to ease buy and sell practices for *casual gamers*, games like Everquest (though not from the beginning) and World of Warcraft have implemented in-game markets where players can put items for sale. While enhancing the cooperation between *casual gamers* all these facilities also reduce the chances of building a strong community by limiting contacts between players.

**Competition Between Players:** in most MMOG, players have the possibility to compete with each other by fighting through their avatars. After the lessons learned from Ultima Online [6], in which players could lose everything after a fight and where Player Killers (those players whose favorite entertainment feature is to ruin the other players game experience) were a real plague,

MMOG designers have been very careful with this feature. Player versus Player (PvP) fights are usually strictly regulated, limited to specific zones or servers, sometimes to avatars of the same level or upon explicit mutual agreement. However, while efficiently protecting a pacific *casual gamer* against harassment from an expert Player Killer, these limitations tend to make the PvP feature boring. In order to give a more exciting and controlled background to competition, MMOG designs have included more or less convincing storylines statically separating players in several *realms* competing with each other. The main benefit in this approach is that it enhances the community feeling inside each *realm*.

In Neocron, the PvP feature was less regulated than in most MMOG, and used a system of penalties to try and dissuade Player Killers. Harassment by repetitive killings in an unsafe zone of the world caused the killer to be threatened by powerful law enforcement NPC in the trading areas of the MMOG. The death of the penalized player would also drop a lot of his equipment for other players to take. While this system could still be abused, it had the advantage of being less artificial and kept the PvP immersive thrill by not totally discarding danger.

### 3 Conclusion and Perspectives

In order to retain *hardcore gamers*, time and dedication should still be recompensated, but it should not be the main reward criteria in order to lessen frustration for *casual gamers*. Solutions can be found for instance in making avatar's evolution features rewarding in themselves, providing entertainment and content by using the best of interactive storytelling and AI techniques in a *games-in-the-game* fashion. Indeed, recent games like World of Warcraft and City of Heroes have already demonstrated improvements in these aspects compared to their predecessors. More variety in game-plays is also desirable, including game phases relying more on the player abilities instead of relying only on his avatars' one. For instance, combats or item retrieval relying on instant strategy or reflexes (like in Neocron), whereas currently complex to implement satisfyingly in a MMOG technical context, provide a game-play where skilled *casual gamers* could make a difference whereas not skilled *hardcore gamers* could always use their time for training. Technical research enabling game-design progress in these directions should help providing more variety in commercial MMOG to a larger audience.

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